

Discovering Historic Sites on Your Property

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What could be perceived as an eroding ravine may in fact be an old road. This old federal road is in Chambers County.

If you take note of the ground surface while walking along the old trails and backroads of your property, you may recognize the signs of prehistoric or historic activities. The clues to Alabama's heritage are surprisingly common on the landscape. There are traces of past events, lifeways, and communities in private backyards, pastures, forests, rivers, streambeds, open waters and shorelines. Most sites, whether prehistoric or historic, are not easily discovered unless plowed or otherwise exposed. However, the superficial suggestions of past activities may be recognized when you understand what may have caused the varying landscape features you have seen in the woods.

Past Seen in Artifacts

The story of Alabama's prehistoric past is seen in artifact scatters (broken pottery, lithic or



This dry rock chimney is evidence of a historic house site.

stone chips and flakes, etc.), single artifact finds (an arrowhead or projectile point), mounds and mound complexes (Oakville and Bottle Creek), carved or painted rocks (the Sun Circle petroglyph and the Painted Bluff pictograph). They are found in rockshelters, caves and bluffshelters (Russell Cave, Dust Cave, Stanfield-Worley Bluff Shelter), on the floodplains and terraces of the Coosa, Tallapoosa, Tennessee, Alabama, Tombigbee, Mobile and Black Warrior Rivers and their tributaries. They are habitation areas: single-use hunting camps, seasonal campsites, farming hamlets, permanent villages and even townsites; or site-specific activity areas: cemeteries, fishweirs and quarries.

Alabama's historic past is found in many of the same locations as the prehistoric sites since the needs and wants of peoples remain essentially the same throughout time: food,



Old cemeteries found in Alabama range from unmarked grave sites to the more formal, such as this one with rock walls.



Brick fragments are a clue that a home was once nearby.

shelter and water. There are uncounted historic artifact scatters and isolated artifact finds, trash dumps, isolated historic houses and farmsteads, covered bridges, small communities and towns. There are also battlefields and forts dating from before the Revolutionary War through the War of 1812, the 1813-1814 Creek Indian War, the Civil War, and even World War I and II (Fort Conde, Fort Toulouse, Fort Morgan, Horseshoe Bend, Fort Mitchell and Janney Furnace), and there are the homes of early settlers and famous Alabamians (Pond Spring/Joe Wheeler Plantation, Magnolia Grove).

Correspondingly, there are remnants of single and multi-use activity sites: the few broken pieces of corrugated clay pots used in the turpentine industry, the

barrel hoops from a moonshine still, the burnt wood and ash mound from a limestone kiln, the rock terraces from farming, or the hundreds of broken pottery pieces associated with the pottery-making industry. Even the single unmarked gravesite or the more formally recognized cemetery with more than a hundred marked graves represents activity areas.

Other than the fact that prehistoric and historic sites have been recorded in Alabama, a strong connection is that almost all of these sites occur on private property. Some sites have been preserved by private citizens; some have been preserved through the actions of local communities, governments and agencies; many have been preserved and donated

to the citizens of Alabama. These sites were, for the most part, almost instantly recognized as records of past activities and unique examples of our local, state and national heritage (Moundville, Confederate Memorial Park, Mobile Middle Bay Lighthouse).

Other sites or records of past lifeways are not so easily discerned. The presence of a historic house site may not be so obvious as rock foundation walls or a still-standing structure such as a dry-rock (no mortar) chimney. Collapsed walls that have formed a small linear rise, maybe in the shape of a square or rectangle, may represent the house. On the other hand, the house may have been “robbed” of whole bricks and logs or planks (re-used in the new place!), leaving only a scatter of brick fragments and bent or discarded nails. Then again, the house may have been razed and pretty much all that is left is a dozed pile of topsoil, broken glass, broken ceramics, and broken bricks. Or, there may be a small round depression (a well that has been filled) or a deep hole that represents an uncapped abandoned well. It may be that the entire house was dismantled and moved to another location, in which case there may only be a few corner foundation rocks—large stone slabs that held a frame house off the ground.

Perhaps the old ravine that has been eroding “since time began” is really an old roadbed, cut deep by natural erosion hurried along by the hoofs and wheels of horses, carriages, wagons and early auto-



Remains of a collapsed rock wall belonging to an old house.

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Historical Sites

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mobiles, then abandoned when landowners moved or another nearby road was cleared or more tolerable and less abused. Then again, that old road may be the very same one you travel on every day—but now it is a county or state road that has been maintained with few changes in alignment. Or maybe it has recently been converted to a hiking or biking trail for recreational use.

On second thought, that old raised roadbed may not be the typical roadway most people think about. There are hundreds of old railroad spurs abandoned after the timbering industry disappeared in the early 1900s. There are also a few pre-Civil War railroad beds still in existence—minus the wooden ties, iron spikes, tieplates and other fixtures. This railroad “furniture” is long gone—re-used on another railroad or melted for use during the Civil War or even WWII!

Historic Sites Disappearing

More than a million archaeological sites have been recorded in the United States; in Alabama, more than 25,000 sites have been documented by professional and avocational archaeologists and landowners. Over half of the prehistoric and historic sites are on privately owned forestland, cropland and grazing land. However, that being said, not all properties have been archaeologically surveyed and not all sites have been officially reported, much less discovered. There are literally thousands of unknown archeological sites that have yet to be located in Alabama. In fact, the specific locations of more than a few places that are known to exist are actively being researched and sought, especially those associated with the Spanish explorer Hernando DeSoto's expedition and the Native American towns he visited (most especially Mauvilla).

Unfortunately, the total number of archaeological sites is rapidly disappearing due to development, looting (illegal digging for personal profit or gains), erosion and other natural factors. The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service estimates that at least one out of five known sites is affected by some sort of land management activity or practice.

The preservation of the majority of these known and yet to be discovered non-renewable resources largely depends upon the individual efforts of private landowners. The state and the federal government have major responsibilities as a result of historic preservation laws, but these laws do not apply to private properties unless there are federal funds, assistance, or permits associated with private projects.

To protect sites, landowners are encouraged to assess the natural and cultural resources (archaeological and historic sites) they own and develop land use management plans that limit the adverse effects of conservation practices or consider practices that may provide benefits and actually protect the traces of Alabama heritage. In addition, there are some tax benefits and incentives available for engaging in conservation easements to protect sites and reduce the tax burden (which may be based on development potential). Income taxes may be lowered by donations or bargain sales of easements to the Archaeological Conservancy, The Nature Conservancy, or other non-profit groups and estate tax savings are possible with the donation of easements in perpetuity for conservation purposes.

For More Information

For more information regarding archeology, or for assistance in preparing conservation plans to protect archaeological and historic sites, please contact your local NRCS field office for the NRCS cultural resources specialist. Additional sources of information include the Alabama Historical Commission (www.preserveala.org), the Alabama Archaeological Society (www.gulfmart.com/org/aas/welcomehp.htm) and Alabama's universities (http://prism.troyst.edu/~tsu_arch/; <http://bama.ua.edu/~cmeyer/oasweb.htm>; www.auburn.edu; and www.southalabama.edu/archaeology/old_mobile/).

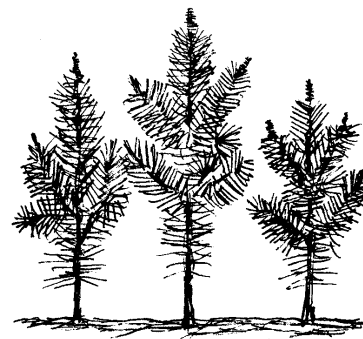
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